

What did I learn?

In southern France, I studied Occitan identity and how people who identify as Occitan relate to central France. I found that one's place of origin, where one currently lives, or one's race do not greatly contribute to identity in Occitania. The Occitan identity is loose and malleable. While I expected identity in northern Spain to be quite the opposite of Occitan identity, I instead found many similarities. I expected the Basque people to have much stricter identity signifiers than Occitania, but that does not seem to be the case based on my conversation with José Ramon, a friend of my professor on the trip. He said that someone is Basque because they live in the Basque country. One does not necessarily have to speak the Basque language or have a Basque familial history. Identity and language are connected in Belgium as well. The country is split into two distinct cultures based on language, the Flemish north and the Walloon south. The two groups are very different, but there is not a lot of true animosity between them. Paris is the symbol for the traditional identity of France. The people who identify with this group have familial history in France and are members of the Parisian aristocracy. However, Paris no longer looks as it did in the past; it is more diverse.



France Beyond Borders

For my STEP Signature Project I went on a study abroad program to France, Spain, and Belgium. I went from Southern France to Northern Spain to Brussels to Paris. We studied several identities within these countries connected to language as we moved through these locations. It was an opportunity to use my French language skills in native speaking contexts. In each city we visited I talked with locals about their identity and experienced life in their shoes.



Personal Impact

My view of the world transformed on my study abroad experience, transformed more than my understanding of myself I think. I have been taking classes that highlight conflicts across the globe to complete my international studies major. I have studied peoples and groups committing violence against others to protect their identities or eradicate identities they felt threatened their own. I realize now I had come to expect violence and hate between conflicting identities. However, after learning about several identity groups on my study abroad experience I see that identity differences do not always equate to conflict.

Moving Forward

I learned about several cultures that hold onto unique identities and maintain peaceful relations with their ruling governments, which opened my world view to the peaceful prospects already existing in the world. This change will help me be a better academic and professional by allowing me to maintain an open mind. I hope I am able to continue my academic career without biases. In addition, I hope to keep a more positive outlook in life. I also know that I want to keep traveling. Visiting so many unique communities and places was an amazing experience that I hope to repeat. I especially want to interact with locals when I travel because those experiences were some of the most enlightening from my study abroad trip.



STEP

SECOND-YEAR TRANSFORMATIONAL
EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

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My Favorites

One of my favorite experiences on this study abroad trip was meeting new people and making new friends. I was able to spend a lot of time with new people and got to know them very well, so that now they are some of my closest friends. I also enjoyed getting to speak with local members of different identity groups to get practical knowledge about how different groups in Europe identify themselves and interact. And of course, getting to see beautiful and historical places in Europe was incredibly exciting. From the Notre Dame in Paris to the first cinema in La Ciotat, I saw many beautiful places. One specific experience I will always remember was walking 13 miles on the El Camino trail in northern Spain. The Camino is traditionally a spiritual pilgrimage. Walking along the trail was both beautiful and enlightening.